

**ANOTHER TURN OF THE SCREW:  
SCEPTICISM AND PROPOSITIONAL ANALYSIS\***

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**Zusammenfassung**

In order to consider whether Wittgenstein's strategy in relation to scepticism succeeds or fails, I examine his approach to certainty. As part of this general objective, I establish a comparison between the different uses of language that Wittgenstein mentions in *On Certainty*, and his distinction between what has sense (is meaningful), what lacks it (is senseless), and what is absurd (is nonsense) in the *Tractatus*. In my opinion, this comparison has three advantages: first, it allows the role of the so-called special propositions in *On Certainty* to be clarified; second, it illuminates the relationship between some features that belong to special propositions in *On Certainty* and the characteristics that define what is senseless in the *Tractatus*; and, last, it shows the status of what some interpreters, like Peter Hacker, have denominated 'insightful nonsense' in the *Tractatus*.

On the nature of nonsense, I believe in an intermediate position between on the one hand the traditional or standard interpretations of the *Tractatus* in this regard of, for example, Peter Hacker (1986, 2000), Elisabeth Anscombe (1971), Robert Fogelin (1976), David Pears (1986), and Brian McGuinness (2002a, 2002b and 1993), and on the other, the so-called new, resolute or austere interpretations of it of Cora Diamond (1991, 2000 and 2004), James Conant (1993, 2000 and 2004), and Alice Crary (2000a), among others. In general, the results of this comparison support the thesis that Wittgenstein's work, beyond its distinction in different periods, has a conceptual continuity.

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## 1. The role of doubt in our linguistic practices

In his last text, *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein develops his ideas on scepticism and the limits of knowledge. At the end of his life Wittgenstein sought to describe the structure of knowledge and derive epistemological conclusions from his linguistic analysis of some epistemic terms. A good way to understand the epistemological entries contained in *On Certainty* is to reflect upon Wittgenstein's analysis of the notion of doubt. His reflections on the notion of doubt, its role in our language, and the linguistic and action-based behaviours associated with its use allow him to distinguish knowledge from certainty, and to view scepticism in a new way.

In *On Certainty* Wittgenstein points out that sceptical doubt is not, even if it seems so, a radicalisation of common doubt. On the contrary, it is something rather different. He emphasizes that in the process which leads from doubting a particular something to doubting anything in general, our doubt gradually loses its meaning. At some point, it even ceases to be intelligible:

For it is not true that a mistake merely gets more and more improbable as we pass from the planet to my own hand. No; at some point it has ceased to be conceivable. (C §54)

In my opinion, Wittgenstein's most interesting argument against global scepticism lies in his assertion that any doubt presupposes command of a language game. That is, we can only doubt a proposition if we first understand what the proposition means. I can only deny that I know that this is a hand, if I have previously understood what it means to say that this is a hand:

"I don't know if this is a hand". But do you know what the word "hand" means? And don't say "I know what it means now for me". And isn't it an empirical fact — that *this* word is used like *this*? (C §306)

Wittgenstein states that understanding a proposition requires us to know how to use that proposition correctly. Hence, any doubt we may place upon a proposition must take into account the language game in which that proposition is embedded. In other words, we cannot deny a proposition independently of our linguistic practices:

"What right have I not to doubt the existence of my hands?" ... But someone who asks such a question is overlooking the fact that a doubt about existence only works in a language-game. Hence, that we should first have to ask: what would such a doubt be like? (C §24)

As a result of this approach, Wittgenstein concludes that doubting must always come to an end. A speaker who raises questions without stopping at some point does not abide by the rules that govern our communicative praxis. The game of questions and answers has its own rules, and they must be observed. There comes a point when it makes no sense to raise further questions. Thus, whoever perseveres in raising objections, is not a good player of the doubting game. When the sceptic exercises his doubt without coming to an end, he places himself out of the language game that doubting consists of.

Hence, Wittgenstein appeals to our linguistic practices and the way we learn them, to show that we can doubt particular facts in particular circumstances, but that we cannot doubt them all at

the same time. In this manner, he shows that sustaining global sceptical doubt implies rejecting our linguistic practices. But this is just not a possibility. It is important to clarify here that Wittgenstein does not refer to a mere incapacity on our part, but to an essential feature of what judging is:

“We could doubt every single one of these facts, but we could not doubt them *all*. Would not it be more correct to say: “we do not doubt them *all*”. Our not doubting them all is simply our manner of judging, and therefore of acting. (C §232)

A doubt that doubted everything would not be a doubt. (C §450)

What would it be like to doubt now whether I have two hands? Why can't I imagine it at all? What would I believe if I didn't believe that? So far I have no system at all within which this doubt might exist. (C §247)

In the above paragraphs we have seen that doubts presuppose a language game. When we introduce a doubt within a language game, it has sense. But if we try to construct a doubt out of the language game in which we are embedded, or if we try to build a doubt against the language game as a whole, then our doubt will lack any sense. Wittgenstein's arguments show that any doubt presupposes the existence of something that cannot be doubted, that is, doubts are possible only because certainty exists. The game of doubting presupposes certainty:

If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting presupposes certainty. (C §115)

Thus we arrive to the end of Wittgenstein's critique of scepticism. The core of his argumentation lies in asking the following: What kind of doubts does the sceptic raise? To what extent is it valid to insert those doubts in the language game in which we operate? His answer to these questions emphasizes the fact that some aspects of our thoughts cannot be doubted, since they are what allow the formulation of doubt. Thus the analysis of the sceptical doubt —its premises and consequences— allows him to prove that any doubt presupposes the existence of a domain of certainty and hence, that scepticism must be mistaken.

Of course, Wittgenstein's acceptance of the existence of certainty forces us to clarify what he understands by that term. I turn to this point now.

## **2. The realm of certainty**

### **2.1. Special propositions**

Wittgenstein appeals to our common reaction against sceptical doubts to conclude that the sceptic's use of daily language is mistaken. We realize that something goes wrong with sceptical doubts when we are unable to sustain them. Sceptical doubt ceases to be meaningful to us as soon as we cannot support it anymore.

This remark involves a great discovery. At some point in the process of questioning whether

a claim is valid, we notice that our feet have hit the ground. We find then that some propositions of our language stand so squarely in front of us that they are no longer questionable. In the following, we will refer to these propositions as *special* or *privileged* propositions:

That is to say, the *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn. (C §341)<sup>1</sup>

The reason why there can be neither doubt nor proof of these special propositions is that any question or argument we may try to develop must start from the assumption of their validity. Thus, any inquiry about the extension of our knowledge is built upon the validity of these special propositions, since everything we judge as being knowledge presupposes them. To accept their validity is just the way we inquire about the limits of our knowledge.

It is important to stress that, according to Wittgenstein, these privileged propositions are not empirical. They lie at the foundations of our discourse, and support all the other propositions we utter, which belong to the specific language game for which they provide the foundations. Hence they are not the result of an empirical investigation, but they make that very inquiry possible. This means that whilst any other empirical proposition measures its validity in relation to privileged propositions, the latter do not require further justification:

It might be imagined that some propositions, of the form of empirical propositions, were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened but fluid; and that this relation altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became fluid. (C §96)

At the foundation of well-founded belief lies belief that is not founded. (C §253)

In effect, our language allows us neither to prove nor to question issues like, for example, the existence of our hands or of the earth —except on the very few occasions that we will mention later. That is so because every time we raise doubts about these facts "language goes on holiday", to use the famous metaphor of *Philosophical Investigations* (PI §38). In short, the language game in which we are immersed presupposes the existence of a set of propositions that are certain. This set of propositions governs our communicative practices as rules of discourse whose function is not so much to pass on information about the world as to organize our linguistic exchanges:

Now might not "I *know*, I am not just surmising, that here is my hand" be conceived as a proposition of grammar? (C §57)

In this sense, we can say that the special propositions we are talking about constitute the grammar of our language, thus they can also be named "grammatical propositions". Admittedly, saying that special propositions can also be named grammatical propositions faces the following

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<sup>1</sup> I have quoted here, and used in general, D. Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe's translation of "Satz" as "proposition", although it has been argued that this translation can lead to serious problems in some cases.

difficulty, namely, that the expression “grammatischer Satz” appears only in C§§57, 58 — firstly within a question and secondly within a conditional sentence. There is therefore not much text for interpretation. Yet, the secondary literature has debated whether or not to identify special propositions with grammatical propositions.<sup>2</sup> In sections 3.2 and 4 below I intend to show to what extent this identification works and to what extent it applies no further.

## 2.2. Meaningful, nonsense and senseless

These reflections suggest that in *On Certainty* Wittgenstein constructs a tripartite classification of the propositions of our language —that is, of the applications of sentences or, to put it another way, of sentences in certain uses—, as follows:

- First, empirical propositions, whose meaning and truth value depend upon the context in which we use them. That is the case of the sentence "I know this is my hand" when a victim utters it after being unharmed in an accident/explosion.
- Second, propositions, which we may call dogmatic, that lack meaning in any related context. This is the case, for example, of the sentence "I know this is my hand" when it is introduced in a philosophical conversation with the aim of refuting the sceptic.
- Third, propositions that seem to be empirical but that, in certain contexts, become special or grammatical propositions. Such is the case of the sentence "I know this is my hand" when we use it in the context of a philosophical analysis about what the discussion with the sceptic shows.

The above distinctions about the way a sentence can have meaning or lack it play an essential role in Wittgenstein's argument. Empirical propositions present no problem of interpretation when they are pronounced in the appropriate circumstances, since then they make full sense, i.e., they are meaningful. Dogmatic sentences can also be straightforwardly evaluated, since according to Wittgenstein they are clearly absurd. The problem arises, however, in relation to the so-called special propositions.

Thus, to understand the way Wittgenstein solves the question of meaning in relation to the special propositions we are talking about, I suggest we turn to a distinction that he drew in the *Tractatus* between three types of proposition: meaningful (*sinnvoll*), nonsensical or absurd (*unsinnig*), and senseless (*sinnlos*). Examples of the first type (meaningful propositions) are any proposition that belongs to the natural science corpus and any proposition that belongs to ordinary language. Examples of the second type (nonsensical propositions) are the propositions that compose the *Tractatus* (the so-called tractarian propositions) as well as any other proposition belonging to metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics. Examples of the third type (senseless propositions) are logical tautologies and their contradictory negations.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf., for example, Kober 1993, 315.

In my opinion, the tripartite distinction drawn by the *Tractatus* between meaningful, nonsensical, and senseless propositions may help to understand some features of the special propositions that attracted Wittgenstein's attention in the notes that make up *On Certainty*. There, Wittgenstein tackled the sphere of certainty when reflecting upon the conditions of intelligibility for some propositions. He discovered that the same sentence can have different conditions of intelligibility, depending on the context in which the sentence is uttered. Thus, whether a proposition like "I know this is my hand" makes sense or not depends upon the circumstances in which it is pronounced:

I) If we introduce this sentence in a daily conversation as an empirical observation—for example, if a victim utters these words after opening a package containing a bomb—, then it will be meaningful (*sinnvoll*), and will have a truth value ascribed to it. This will be a perfectly legitimate application of this sentence. It will thus be a meaningful proposition in an empirical context.

II) However, if we pronounce the sentence in a philosophical discussion, and interpret it as if it were an empirical proposition—as both the sceptic and G. E. Moore do—, the proposition becomes nonsense (*Unsinn*). It is thus particular applications of the sentence in particular contexts—which I have here referred to as dogmatical applications—which convert this type of propositions in nonsensical.

III) Finally, if we use the sentence in the context of a philosophical discussion and we interpret it as a special proposition or a grammatical rule—as Wittgenstein does—, then—according to my thesis—it will, strictly speaking, lose its empirical sense, and acquire features that resemble, on the one hand, the senseless (*sinnlos*) propositions and, on the other, the nonsensical (*unsinnig*) propositions.<sup>3 4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> One might observe that in circumstance II the speaker (that is, Moore or the sceptic) uses the sentence, while in circumstance III the speaker (that is, Wittgenstein or anyone who follows his line of thought for the sake of philosophical analysis) does not really *use* it—he or she simply *quotes* it. Of course, strictly speaking, quoting is already a way of using, but I hope that if I phrase the observation as a distinction between using and quoting, this will help us to illuminate two observations. First, the fact that we can use the sentence in the way we have denominated here *quoting*, reveals that the function of talking about special propositions is not empirical (to communicate content or knowledge about the world) but philosophical (to discover the realm of certainty and to reflect upon its existence). We could even say that “quoting” a special proposition is a kind of meta-language. Thus we engage in meta-discourse when we reflect upon the nature and status of special propositions. For example, when we discover—as Wittgenstein does—that they are neither true nor false, that they can neither be proved nor falsified, that their existence is necessary for the rest of language to exist, or any other attempt to describe what they are. Second, the fact that we can use the sentence in the way we have denominated here *quoting*, reveals also that we cannot enter the realm of certainty through an intellectual or voluntary act, and just *being* or *living* there on purpose. We just cannot go into the realm of certainty because we are always already within it. Nonetheless, we can indeed talk about it, as Wittgenstein does. We are certain that it exists, but we cannot be sure of what it is like. Wittgenstein even gives very serious consideration to the possibility that the realm of our certainties might not be fully described (C §102). This fact might also explain why you cannot prove (*erweisen*) to someone who invests in a quite different set of beliefs that he is wrong.

It is now necessary to develop further my interpretative proposal. Following the interpretative hypothesis that I have presented, some features that define special propositions in *On Certainty* are common to the definition of senseless propositions in the *Tractatus*. To illuminate them, I shall explore in more detail the comparison between the role of special propositions in *On Certainty* and the role of characteristically senseless propositions in the *Tractatus*, namely, logical propositions, in section 4. I will then deal with the analysis of the kind of features that allow for a comparison between special propositions and nonsensical sentences in section 5.

### 3. Resemblance between senseless propositions in *TLP* and special propositions in *OC*

In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein explained that logical propositions did not have sense. But in relation to them he introduced the important distinction between being nonsensical (*unsinnig*) and being senseless (*sinnlos*). Logical propositions are not absurd, but senseless, that is, they lack any meaning at all. This assertion becomes clear when we remember his definition of logical propositions as tautological (TLP 6.1) and certain (TLP 4.464). The description implies that nothing of what may happen in the world can ever affect them, whether in confirmation or refutation of them (TLP 6.1222). He thus sustains that logical propositions do not convey any information but say nothing (TLP 6.11). He also claims that they lack semantic content or have zero content. [A parallel analysis is to be applied to contradictions.]

We can now apply the definition of logical propositions to our understanding of special propositions in *On Certainty*. In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein claims that logical propositions are certain and tautological, lack semantic content, do not convey any information, and must therefore be considered meaningless. In a similar fashion, in *On Certainty* Wittgenstein considers that special propositions form a certain and unchangeable structure, do not transmit any information either, and

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The most you could do is try to convert him (*bekehren*) to your own world view (C § 92).

<sup>4</sup> It might well be the case that what the two observations mentioned in the above footnote show is “the aporia that any critical philosophy—any philosophy that aims at delimitation— meets, i.e., the need to trespass, in the very act of delimiting, those limits that are supposedly established as insurmountable (in this case, when setting the limits of thought, we would have to be able to think about what it cannot be thought)” (Sanf lix 2008, 6). According to Sanf lix, Wittgenstein engages in critical philosophy for he aims at establishing the limits (not so much of thought as) of language. Thus the difficulties mentioned above of dwelling or entering the realm of certainty would just be another way of phrasing the aporia. In order to be able to set the limit of language, would we not need to enter the field of what cannot be said, what is unsayable? How else could we then talk about the sayable (meaningful), except by appealing to the unsayable (nonsensical)? (Cf. also Gonz lez Cast n 2001, 195-196). Wittgenstein’s enigmatic clue to understanding his own strategy is contained in his famous remark: “My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them —as steps— to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it)” (TLP 6.54). In recent years an intense debate among scholars has arisen on how to interpret this remark. Being able to follow Wittgenstein’s track through the woods of critical philosophy depends upon it. I will come back to this issue again in section 5.

can therefore also be considered meaningless—always taking into account that their being meaningless ultimately depends on their being uttered in a particular context.

Up to here we have resumed some of the similarities between logical and special propositions, which might lead us to understand the latter as being senseless. If we pursued this path, we should then have to try to think of something like a senseless certainty! But we must be very careful at this point. These reflections might lead us to believe that the role of special propositions in *On Certainty* is similar to the role that logical propositions played in an earlier period of Wittgenstein's intellectual development. However, we should not be too tempted by the advantages of such an identification since there are important differences between both types of sentences. In my opinion, these differences exhibit precisely the extent to which the propositional treatment of the realm of certainty poses insurmountable difficulties.

One of the differences is Wittgenstein's emphasis that the fact that special propositions are certain does not imply that they are either true or false. The implication of this assertion is that the special propositions in *On Certainty* are not tautologies in the sense in which logical propositions in the *Tractatus* are. At the end of his life, then, Wittgenstein was convinced that a discussion about truth or falsehood did not apply in the case of special propositions. However, if we rule out the possibility of special propositions' being true or false, it will not be possible to consider them "propositions" in a strict sense since according to the standard definition a proposition is a linguistic expression that can bear a truth value. This, of course, has to do with the fact that, by the time Wittgenstein wrote the notes that make up *On Certainty*, he had already abandoned that definition. For the so-called second Wittgenstein, having a truth-value is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for being a proposition —there are many kinds of language games and truth and falsehood do not apply to all of them, for example, questions, exclamations, orders, or prayers. Having abandoned the old notion of proposition, special propositions can still be called "propositions", despite the fact that they are neither true nor false. But —and this is my point— being neither true nor false, they cannot not resemble tautologies, at least, in the sense in which the latter are conceived in *Tractatus*.<sup>5</sup>

A second feature that urges caution when comparing the two notions from different periods of Wittgenstein's career is the following: while logical propositions are not usually employed in the context of learning, some special propositions can be used for that purpose. Thus, while it does not make sense to tell a child "It rains or it does not rain" to teach her something about rain,<sup>6</sup> we can

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<sup>5</sup> As regards this point, Javier Vilanova has pointed out to me that, in texts like *Philosophical Investigations* or *Philosophical Grammar*, Wittgenstein suggests that tautologies are neither true nor false, for they belong to the grammar of language. Vilanova further considers that it would thus be correct to trace an analogy between tautologies and sentences like "The world existed before I was born" or "This is my hand". I accept that the analogy between tautologies and special propositions can be traced *within* the so-called second Wittgenstein. In the above section, however, my analysis is aimed at the resemblance between special propositions in *On Certainty* and tautologies in *Tractatus*.

<sup>6</sup> Adrian Moore once pointed out to me an amusing footnote in Brian McGuinness's biography of Wittgenstein. In the main text McGuinness writes: "In Wittgenstein's example, I know nothing about the weather when I know that it is either raining or not raining". Then in a footnote, after giving the reference, he adds: "He had been out of England for some time when he wrote this" (McGuinness 1988,



teach her something if we say "This is a hand".

Of course, saying to a child "Either it is raining or it is not raining" could be part of a programme to inculcate in her the practice of classical logic. Furthermore, it could be a way to teach her how to use the words "or" and "not", that is, a way to teach her the grammar of our language. In this case, there would be no significant difference with the pedagogical use of "This is my hand". Thus, both sentences are nonsensical if pronounced as empirical propositions (circumstance II) but convey information about the way we use certain terms —i.e. the logical connectives— if we utter them to illuminate a particular language game (circumstance III). In our previous considerations we assumed that special propositions are meaningless and do not convey any information. We can now verify that special propositions do not lack sense and are not meaningless, but convey information about the way we use certain terms. Again, this difference highlights a key role of the so-called special propositions, which does not fit well with their characterization as simple "propositions".

This last comment takes us on a new trail; so I now turn to develop the alternative interpretative hypothesis of my argument, that is, the analysis of special propositions as nonsensical (*unsinnig*).

## **4. Resemblance between nonsensical propositions in *TLP* and special propositions in *OC***

### **4.1. Traditional vs. New interpretations of nonsense**

The non-propositional character of certainty is shown by the idea that the so-called special propositions do not depict facts about the world but regulate the rules of our language. They say something about how we think, about our symbology. This idea helps me to deepen the comparative analysis between the different uses of language in *On Certainty* and the types of proposition in the *Tractatus* that I am proposing. In the previous section we saw which aspects are shared by special and senseless propositions, and which ones distinguish them. In this section we will consider the relationship between special and nonsensical propositions.

In recent years, a fierce dispute has arisen among scholars over the nature of nonsense in the *Tractatus*. On the one hand, there is the mainstream, traditional or standard interpretation, paradigmatically defended by Peter Hacker (1986, 2000), and also supported by Elisabeth Anscombe (1971), Robert Fogelin (1976), David Pears (1986), and Brian McGuinness (2002a, 2002b and 1993), not to mention Russell, Ramsey, and Neurath. On the other hand, there is the new, resolute or austere interpretation defended by the so-called group of "the new Wittgensteinians", among whom Cora Diamond (1991, 2000 and 2004), James Conant (1993, 2000 and 2004), and Alice Crary (2000a) stand out. It is certainly a debate rife with fruitful ideas and controversies. With respect to the argument of this essay, it is important to bear in mind some of the theses of the opposing positions:

1) The mainstream, traditional, or standard interpretation sustains that nonsensical propositions violate the rules of logical syntax and the limits of meaning. They are pseudopropositions or conceptual impossibilities that do not say anything —like the senseless propositions— nor do they show anything about the form or the content of the world —contrary to the senseless propositions. Now, this approach emphasises that Wittgenstein accepts that the term ‘Unsinn’ (translated into English as ‘nonsense’) is used to exclude different things for different reasons. To welcome this polarity, Hacker (1986, 22) talks of:

a) Overt, patent, manifest, notorious, or evident nonsense

b) Covert, disguised, or latent nonsense

To back up his distinction, he appeals to some textual evidences, foreign to the *Tractatus*, where Wittgenstein says, for example, the following: “*Was ich lehren will, ist: von einem nicht offenkundigen Unsinn zu einem offenkundigen übergehen*” (Anscombe’s English translation of this quote is: “*My aim is: to teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense*”) (PI §464). Patent nonsense does not require any operation to be discovered to be such. Examples of this type are, of course, absurd expressions like “Err to ja”. But also an expression like “‘Is the good more or less identical to the beautiful?’ falls into the class of overt nonsense” (Hacker, 1986, 18). However, most of philosophy, Hacker says, is covert nonsense because it does not violate the boundaries of sense in an obvious way, but rather violates the principles of the logical syntax of language in a way that is not evident in daily language to an untrained mind. As for the philosophical operations that allow us to capture or to discover the covert, disguised, non manifest nor evident nonsense, the following texts can also be consulted: PI §524; AWL 64; LWL 98. In this regard, “the only difference between ordinary and philosophical nonsense is that between *patent* nonsense which causes no confusion since we recognize it immediately by the “jingle of words”, and *latent* nonsense, “where operations are required to enable us to recognize it as nonsense” (Glock 1996, 263).

Moreover, Hacker adds that there are two types of covert nonsense:

b.i) Misleading, incorrect, insight-less, absolute, or gibberish nonsense

b.ii) Illuminating, correct, insightful, interesting, or non-gibberish nonsense

Let us examine the nuances that separate both types:

b.i) Propositions belonging to the first type —covert nonsensical sentences that are misleading or absolute nonsense— violate, as nonsense, the rules of logical syntax and the boundaries of sense; they are thus pseudopropositions or conceptual impossibilities. A case of misleading nonsense would be “Err to ja”, an example that Wittgenstein uses in his Cambridge lectures. The lack of understanding of how the principles of logical syntax function in their case leads to confusion regarding the essential nature of any possible symbolism. In other words, they are nonsense because they do not respect the conditions of possibility of any representation. “The source of the error of past philosophy lies in its failure to understand the principles of the logical syntax of language which are obscured by grammatical forms. These principles reflect the essential nature of any

possible symbolism, the conditions of the very possibility of representation. Failure to grasp them engenders the illusion that one can say things that can only be shown. This in turn leads to misleading nonsense” (Hacker, 1986, p. 19). In the Wittgensteinian scheme of thought, many philosophical propositions that talk about aesthetics, ethics, religion, or personal identity, like for example, the expression “No one can have my thought”, incur in this type of mistakes and thus belong to the type of covert and misleading nonsense.

b.ii) Propositions belonging to the second type —covert nonsensical sentences that are illuminating, correct, valuable, interesting or insightful nonsense— also violate the rules of logical syntax of language and the boundaries of sense; they are thus, like the previous ones, pseudopropositions or conceptual impossibilities. A case of illuminating nonsense would be “The world is all that is the case”, the opening remark of the *Tractatus*. Now, these expressions stand out because, even if they are based on misunderstandings of logical syntax, they manage to express some kind of insight into the workings of logical syntax. In that respect, they convey some kind of comprehension about what makes language possible; in other words, they express something important about what underpins it. “Illuminating nonsense will guide the attentive reader to apprehend what is shown by other propositions which do not purport to be philosophical; moreover it will intimate, to those who grasp what is meant, its own illegitimacy” (Hacker, 1986, 18-19). They are pseudo-propositions that try to say what can only be shown. Statements from the *Tractatus* like “Objects are simple” (TLP 2.02) fall under this heading; they are examples of insightful covert nonsense. From this perspective, the *Tractatus*’ philosophical pseudopropositions are interesting nonsense because they illuminate what can’t be said, but can only be shown. In a special way, they express correctly something which is ineffable; they are correct unsayables, but correct nonetheless (TLP 4.12ss., 5.534s., 6.54s.; NB 20.10.14).

2) The stream of alternative, new, austere, or resolute interpretation maintains that no nonsense proposition is really a proposition. Philosophical sentences like “Objects are simple” or “No one can have my thought” are nonsense in the same way as “Err to ja”. All these expressions result from a mistake in logical construction, although in the first case this mistake is not obvious and has to be clarified. Nonsensical sentences do not manage to say anything because they happen not to be built in a legitimate way. “The idea is that when Wittgenstein says that a combination of words we are tempted to utter in philosophy is nonsense, he is saying, not that we know what the words attempt to say and that that cannot properly be put into words, but instead that those words do not say anything, that they haven’t (yet) been given any significant use” (Crary, 2000b, 6-7). As a consequence, this position defends that nonsense never conveys insight; no nonsense provides comprehension, captation or elucidation at all. There is thus no useful, important, interesting, profound or ineffable nonsense. None of them, say, *illuminates*. To phrase it perhaps more suggestively: it is not possible to be located in the external point of view: the ladder cannot cross the border.

#### **4.2. My interpretation: a middle path**

In relation to the debate between the standard and new positions, the argument that I present in this essay —the analysis of the extent to which special propositions in *On Certainty* resemble

or otherwise nonsensical propositions in the *Tractatus*— leads to the drawing of the following conclusions. I have argued, firstly, that the propositions that are certain to us are important or valuably correct. In particular, that when the proposition “I know that this is my hand” works as a special proposition, it resembles insightful nonsense (a nonsense of the type b. ii). My thesis captures the idea that in *On Certainty* Wittgenstein points out that special propositions do not say anything about the world; they do not yield knowledge, they yield a kind of understanding of the world. I think this description of special propositions in *On Certainty* helps to illuminate the status of insightful, valuable, or interesting nonsense in the *Tractatus*. The latter express insights into the workings of logical syntax, they say something about how we think, about our symbology; they show something about how language is possible, and about what underpins it. From my point of view, hinge propositions are nonsensical but convey valuable and illuminating insights into what makes language possible —when philosophy helps us to notice their existence. The role of such special propositions in *On Certainty* could therefore be related to the role of insightful or illuminating nonsense in the *Tractatus*. On the status of philosophical propositions, *On Certainty* closes the circle that the *Tractatus* had opened.<sup>7</sup>

In a way, the connection I have indicated supports the *new Wittgensteinians*’ proposal that there is a *significant* continuity in Wittgenstein’s thought, against more traditional interpretations of his work “in so far as such interpretations furnish a narrative about the development of his thought which, while it leaves room for important similarities between the view he holds at different times, accents the idea of a *decisive* break in his mode of philosophizing between the *Tractatus* and his later writings” (Cary, 2000b, 1-2).

Secondly, let us remember that —as I pointed out earlier in paragraph 3.2, circumstance II— the same sentence (“I know that this is my hand”) in another application (the same sentence in another use) was for Wittgenstein a case of misleading, absolute or gibberish nonsense (a nonsense of the type b.i). So the dogmatic use of the sentence “I know that this is my hand”, intended as a sort of Moorian proof against the sceptic, is a clearly absurd language use.

In conclusion, my argument identifies which aspects of special propositions remind us of the nature of misleading, gibberish, or complete nonsense (type b.i. nonsense), and which other features instead make them more akin to illuminating or interesting nonsense (type b.ii. nonsense). In consequence, my interpretation occupies the middle ground between the traditional and the new interpretations of the *Tractatus* in this regard. For I accept, on the one hand, that there are two types of nonsense, while I also think, on the other, that one group of propositions (the special propositions

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<sup>7</sup> The similarity between the special propositions of *On Certainty* and the insightful nonsensical propositions of the *Tractatus* can also be expressed by saying that they both seem to be *prima facie* contingent, while in fact they are unconditionally valid propositions. When “I know that this is my hand” works as a special proposition, it is certain, that is, it is unconditionally valid —nothing that happens in the world can alter its validity. In the same way, any proposition that involves formal concepts in the *Tractatus* — for example, any of the *Tractatus*’ statements that articulate the ontology of the work, i.e. “Objects are simple” or “The world is all that is the case”— are unconditionally valid. “Unlike a meaningful and genuine scientific proposition such as ‘The world is matter and anti-matter’, whose truth is contingent and therefore related to what *de facto* be the case, ‘The world is all that is the case’ is unconditionally valid (or true). The world is all that is the case independently of what the case be” (Sanf  lix 2008, 13).

that are central to Wittgenstein's concern in *On Certainty*) share features with both types; in other words, that depending on the context of application, one and the same sentence (for example, "I know that this is my hand") can be interpreted as being gibberish (i.e., a dogmatic use of an antiseptical proof) or as being an insight (i.e., a proper philosophical use that lets us discover the realm of certainty and reflect upon it.)

## **5. Certainty and facticity**

When Wittgenstein reflects on the nature of the special propositions, he realizes that what is truly important about them is not so much that they look like propositions, but that they contain the norms that govern our discourse and behaviour. We must therefore conclude that what we have called special propositions do not, in fact, belong to our language as an additional element, but rather constitute what binds language together. This corroborates the view that, in the last analysis, Wittgenstein favoured a non-propositional characterization of certainty.

It is at this stage that he appeals to a set of different phenomena that constitute the foundation of our thoughts, expressions and actions. He refers to them with different names like, for example, the inherited tradition, the community of origin, our behaviour, our animality, and even our mythology, all of which are non-intellectual phenomena that may perhaps be subsumed under the heading of "facticity". Wittgenstein uses the term "certainty" to refer to that which supports all our thoughts, expressions and actions. The exploration of the rules of language refers us to a realm beyond language, which cannot be analysed further. The inquiry comes to an end when we understand that the field of certainty exists and constitutes us, but that we cannot make its nature explicit. In the end, what is certain and why it is certain, remains beyond our understanding.

## **6. Evaluation of the sceptical position**

The conclusions we have reached above can help us understand Wittgenstein's response to scepticism. As we have seen, Wittgenstein rejects the validity of the sceptical claim "I doubt whether the world exists because I don't know whether I am dreaming that the world exists". His argument shows that the sceptic's use of the terms "doubt", "know", "dream", and "world" is completely different from the normal use of the terms in the sceptic's community of origin. Wittgenstein's analysis reveals the extent to which the propositions that the sceptic seeks to attack function as certainties in our language. By means of this criticism Wittgenstein denies that an individual could state sceptical doubts about a particular use of language since the community of speakers as a whole legitimises this use.

Wittgenstein's argument in this respect is convincing. As a result, it is generally believed that his linguistic analysis demonstrates that the sceptical challenge is no longer dangerous for epistemology. In my view, however, this conclusion is rather superficial and too optimistic since Wittgenstein's approach to knowledge contains gaps that leave room for doubt. Wittgenstein succeeds in his *reductio ad absurdum* of scepticism when it is introduced at an individual level

within daily practice: I cannot say meaningfully that I do not know whether this is a hand, while I am using it to type this paper. But it is less clear whether Wittgenstein's position can counter successfully a more severe type of scepticism. By this I mean the kind of scepticism that does not involve certain linguistic practices, but the system of language itself.

Wittgenstein discovered the importance of this second type of scepticism when he realized that its specificity is not grasped when the sceptical attitude is described as a mere generalization of empirical doubt. On the contrary, the peculiarity of scepticism lies in the way it forces us to enquire about the rules of use of our language. This type of questioning of the use of language within a community appears, for example, when we ask ourselves how to identify the propositions that are certainties in that community. Despite his efforts to reject scepticism at this level, Wittgenstein was eventually obliged to admit that, in the last resort, it is impossible to identify these propositions.

The reason behind this conclusion is Wittgenstein's thesis that the same expression can have meaning in certain circumstances, whereas it has none in others. Thus it makes sense to say "I know that I have a hand" after opening a package containing a bomb, but most of the time the proposition "I have a hand" has an ascription of certainty. From this fact we can conclude that any questioning about whether a proposition is meaningful, about whether it can be known, and also about whether it is certain, demands further exploration of the circumstances in which the proposition is uttered. Therefore, the problem that the thesis of the diversity of senses raises is how to know in which circumstances it is or is not appropriate to immerse oneself in a lively discussion about the meaning of a proposition or about its description as certain or as knowledge.

Now —and this is a delicate point— when we try to clarify, which circumstances correspond to which language games, a serious obstacle appears. The setting requires us to pay attention to the conditions of use of our sentences or, what is the same, to appeal to "normal circumstances" as the framework into which our declarations fit. At this point, however, Wittgenstein recognizes that we do not possess —and even more significantly, that we cannot possess— any method to distinguish under which circumstances a claim to knowledge or certainty is correct:

If, however, one wanted to give something like a rule here, then it would contain the expression "in normal circumstances". And we recognize normal circumstances but cannot precisely describe them. At most, we can describe a range of abnormal ones. (C §27)

The proposition itself tells us neither when its insertion in some contexts is pertinent, nor when it is superfluous. Besides, any rule we may devise to determine the context of use will have, according to Wittgenstein, an open character. If the "normal circumstances" under which we may use our sentences cannot be specified, that is, if there are no rules to use our propositions, then it is not possible to identify which propositions are certain.

These considerations lead us to conclude that Wittgenstein's position cannot reject a type of scepticism whose objective is to warn us of the impossibility of understanding our own position in the world. This raises an interesting issue, namely, Wittgenstein's recognition of the limits of philosophical reflection. In this sense, one consequence of his analysis of epistemic terms is his thesis that it is impossible to justify the logic behind our language, and hence, we can only assume

its facticity.

Now it is precisely on this issue that Wittgenstein gives the definite and certainly most polemical turn of the screw in his argumentation. He argues that the temptation to seek the foundations of our language games by looking for their finality or their essence is mistaken. Linguistic analysis comes to an end when we recognize the existence of propositions that are certain. This means that it is not necessary to justify their certainty; on the contrary, it is sufficient to understand that they exist. In fact, this is the only movement that is valid philosophically. Ultimately, the idea that we cannot justify our system of meanings does not imply, according to Wittgenstein, that we can pose doubts about it. It makes no sense to think it might be false, in the same way that it makes no sense to think it might be true.

## **7. The limits of language and the philosophical task**

Wittgenstein's assertion that first philosophy or metaphysics is impossible, and that we do not need to worry about this fact, inspires two different considerations about the possibilities of success of global scepticism. On the one hand, one could consider that the realm of certainty shapes us in such a way that we lack the necessary perspective to grasp its truthfulness or falsehood from a higher and neutral point of view. This ties in with both the fact that certainties are gradually acquired in childhood (OC §§94, 279) —hence, at a time when judgments regarding their truth-value do not generally arise— and the fact that afterwards changes in the realm of certainties are not introduced individually, but socially (OC §512). This approach would define global scepticism as unintelligible; a global sceptical doubt would not be able to eliminate our certainties, since it could not go beyond the acceptance of, at least, some of them.

On the other hand, it is my claim that to suppose that there is an unattainable and irrefutable core of certainty implies, precisely, that we are begging the question against scepticism. From this perspective, the postulation of a field of certainties would be a debatable strategy that cannot meet its objective of refuting scepticism.

The above dilemma leaves us with the problem of deciding which of the two positions is correct, that is, with the difficulty of determining to which kind of criterion we could appeal in order to choose between them. In my opinion, once we have arrived at this point, any decision we might make would involve begging the question. In other words, the reasons behind our decision do not need to be accepted by the two parties involved, i.e., the sceptic and his opponent. Wittgenstein cannot prove his conclusions. The reader can accept or reject his presuppositions. At this point, one might be tempted to say that his decision will no longer be based on reasoning. Thus the playing field would no longer be a rational discussion. In accordance with a recurrent feature of Wittgenstein's thought, one might venture the hypothesis that the nature of this problem is, in fact, ethical, in the sense of being related to a life-choice or an attitude.

To conclude, I would like to highlight a feature that has traditionally defined the philosophical task, i.e., the fact that the philosopher sometimes asks a question without awaiting a response, or without aspiring to achieve it. In the eyes of the traditional epistemologist, the

discussion about scepticism shows that the inquiry about knowledge is legitimate, even if there is no definite answer to it. Wittgenstein belongs to that same tradition in which, while the philosopher is well aware of the limits of human knowledge, he still takes seriously the possibility of inquiring. In relation to this point, we should recall the *Tractatus*' important category of nonsense (*unsinnig*) but valuable. It may be that the problem of scepticism belongs to the same field of reality he used to refer to as the mystical.

In any case, Wittgenstein's discussion about scepticism shows, in my opinion, that philosophical questions are worth researching. Our final reaction may be silence, but to arrive at this conclusion it is necessary to cover beforehand a long argumentative path.

In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein develops a logical analysis of language, and concludes by showing that language cannot account for its final premises, namely, the facticity of the world. The path that the late Wittgenstein covers puts into practice his thesis that philosophy is not a theory, but an activity. In other words, philosophy cannot yield knowledge about the facts of the world; through the method of connective analysis, it can rather yield understanding of our logical, grammatical and thought structures.

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